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McNamara and Bundy, August 1967

In August of 1967 I spent an hour with McNamara (a long time for him) at his office in the Pentagon. It was the last time I ever saw him alone. Three months later he was fired for expressing views to LBJ pretty much like mine and he left the Pentagon in the spring. After that he said nothing publicly on Vietnam and did nothing privately that I knew of to help end the war for the next seven years that it went on. After the Pentagon Papers came out in 1971, he was never willing to be in a room with me.

I told him where I thought we were in Vietnam and he read my short memo on what we should do with respect to the upcoming Vietnamese elections. It said we should drop our open and covert support for Thieu and Ky and shift either to neutrality among the candidates or to covert or open support for a candidate who would be willing to seek peace by negotiating with the NLF. In a separate page, to be shown only to McNamara and a few others, I suggested that Tran van Huong was the most suitable candidate for this role.

McNamara said he basically agreed with me, but that political policy like this was really in Rusk's area, and he wasn't taking it on. He said he was concentrating on another issue.

I said, "Putting a lid on the bombing?" He nodded. He had just been in an open confrontation with the JCS in hearings before Stennis' Senate Armed Services Committee, opposing an expansion of the bombing targets and revealing his finding that the bombing up till now had accomplished little or nothing. The Chiefs were furious. (Much later it came out that they had seriously considered resigning as a group, to protest. Wheeler and Westmoreland had rejected this as being too great an attack on the principle of civilian control, too close to the spirit of a coup). LBJ proceeded to give them the targets they wanted before the end of the year, overruling McNamara.

I didn't know it then, but three months later McNamara sent a memo to the President calling for the bombing to be ended and direct negotiations with the NLF to be begun, accepting the prospect of NLF power-sharing in Saigon. No one else had put that on paper before. I don't know how many had even allowed themselves to think it. It was the key to ending the war, the only way it could be ended other than the way it did end eight years later, with our unilateral withdrawal followed by the military collapse of ARVN.

As soon as he read that memo LBJ fired McNamara from the Pentagon, moving him to be head of the World Bank. The move took effect in the end of February, just after the Tet Offensive, which

would almost certainly not have taken place if McNamara's advice had been followed. The summer and fall of 1967 was McNamara's finest hour.

In line with his view that changing US policy on the Vietnamese election had to be handled at State I went to see Bill Bundy, who was in charge of Far East. I had last seen him in Vietnam, just before I got hepatitis. He had asked to see me to be briefed, and I had taken a military flight down from Danang just after coming off my night patrol with the Combined Action Platoon. (It was on that patrol, I always thought, that I may have gotten the hepatitis, lying a long time in ambush in a rice paddy that was probably fertilised with human excrement).

Like McNamara, Bundy seemed to agree with everything I was saying about our prospects in Vietnam, the stalemate and our need to get out. It was the end of the day and he was friendly but tired, low-energy. On my proposal to use the Vietnamese election that fall as a way of getting out gracefully, he said it was too late to change our policy on that. As for getting out of the war in general, he said, "I don't think we can have any movement till after the election." He was referring to our election, in 1968.

I said, "But that's a year away!" He sighed and shook his head sadly. "I know, but I just don't think Hanoi will get serious about negotiating till they see who they're dealing with after next November."

We both knew, I didn't have to say it, that Hanoi would get serious quick enough if we started talking about our getting out rather than their giving up, or about power-sharing in Saigon. I heard him to be saying that this Administration wouldn't address that before next year's election, even though that meant the war would go on at least another year. (It went on for more than seven and a half years. And by the fall of 1967, that forecast would not have surprised me).

I took for granted that his talking about Vietnamese calculations as slowing the prospects up was just a euphemistic way of saying that LBJ wouldn't decide to lose Vietnam before he got reelected. An assistant secretary of state couldn't say that directly, even in private.

In his tone of voice I also heard him saying that he wasn't going to try to buck that, it just wasn't worth it for him. I could understand that, since he was probably right about LBJ. What bothered me, shocked me really, was how relaxed he seemed about his forecast, how easily resigned he was to the prospect of another year of war along with the risk, always, that it would get even larger if it went on. But I thought maybe he was just tired, and careless of how he was sounding.

Bobby Kennedy was the one person I found in Washington that fall who sounded different.